



Temporal distancing and integrating: Exploring coopetition tensions through managerial sensemaking dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing interest in coopetition management strategies, we still lack detailed insights into how the simultaneity of cooperation and competition is cognitively experienced and coped with at the individual level. Based on two case studies, we introduce sensemaking dynamics deeper into the cognitive management approaches of coopetition tensions by demonstrating temporal distancing and integrating as cognitive activities. Temporal distancing captures the perceived difficulties to connect recalled competitive pasts and imagined cooperative futures, whereas referencing re-imagined pasts and futures enables a connection, i.e. temporal integration, informing managerial actions and coopetition decision-making. First, our study extends theoretical insights on how tensions manifest through managerial sensemaking. Second, we contribute to research on individual level coping strategies part of the coopetition capability concept by showing that managerial mindsets encompass continuous re-imaginings of cooperative and competitive pasts, presents and futures. Third, the findings of our study suggest that managers cope with experienced tensions through their capability to not only re-imagine distant competitive and cooperative pasts and futures, but also through enacting these in the present.

1. Introduction

Coopetition is currently attracting considerable interest owing to its empirical prevalence across a variety of industries and organizations (e.g. Bengtsson, Raza-Ullah, & Srivastava, 2020; Czakon, Srivastava, Le Roy, & Gnyawali, 2020). Coopetition is characterized by the simultaneous existence of cooperation and competition between firms that intends to create both firm and joint value through the cooperative business relationship (Czakon et al., 2020). Through cooperation, coopetition involves access of resources and value creation, whereas competition implies leveraging and capturing this value (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Gnyawali & Park, 2009).

Coopetition is a paradoxical relationship due to the simultaneous presence of cooperation and competition interaction logics (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Fernandez, Le Roy, & Gnyawali, 2014; Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, & Kock, 2014). The paradoxical tension inherent in the interaction logics of cooperation (e.g. trust, mutuality, resource exchange) and competition (e.g. rivalry, opportunism, resource leverage) relates to the simultaneous existence of seemingly opposing forces that are interrelated. Scholars argue that managers' ability to deal with the paradoxical tension is critical for performance and securing synergies

from simultaneous cooperation and competition (Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, & Vanyushin, 2018). The introduction of paradox theory – a tool for addressing co-existing and persistent tensions over time, spurring competing demands that require ongoing coping from individuals (Lewis, 2000) – into the coopetition field has given rise to a discussion on the optimal management of coopetition tensions (Bengtsson, Raza-Ullah, & Vanyushin, 2016; Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015).

Coopetition management strategies have traditionally been approached as firm-level constructs (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah & Kostis, 2019), yet an interest in examining the individual-level has recently emerged. From this perspective, coopetition tensions management has been conceptualized as paradoxical thinking or ambidextrous mindsets (e.g. Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015) of managers, ultimately fostering synergy from simultaneous cooperation and competition. Other conceptualizations have connected paradoxical thinking with the development of 'coopetition capabilities', aiming to sustain moderate strengths of cooperation and competition (Bengtsson et al., 2016). Despite these advancements, there is still a lack of coopetition research that focus on coping strategies (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Gnyawali, Madhavan, He, & Bengtsson, 2016), and the individual level (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2020; Czakon et al., 2020), in particular addressing

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cognitive activities (e.g. Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016a, 2016b; Pattinson, Nicholson, & Lindgreen, 2018).

This study contributes to coopetition research with increased knowledge regarding coping with coopetition tensions, by approaching sensemaking dynamics at the individual level. Sensemaking is related to managerial perceptions that can be defined as “apprehension by means of the senses or of the mind” (Mezias & Starbuck, 2003: 4). Although managerial perceptions have recently gained interest in coopetition studies (Czakoń & Czernek-Marszałek, 2020), a solid link to coping with coopetition tensions has not yet been established.

We argue that understanding of managerial coping of coopetition tensions can be expanded by delving deeper into perceptions of the past, present, and the future (Hernes, Simpson, & Söderlund, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). A recent conceptualization further suggests that actors engage in temporal distancing and translation, addressing past and future events, through their present situated activity (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Accordingly, we identify a need to integrate both the past as well as the anticipated future (e.g. Ritala & Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2018), i. e. the retrospective and prospective dimensions of sensemaking (e.g. Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016a) when addressing how the simultaneity of cooperation and competition is coped with. Our purpose is to enhance knowledge on the temporal dynamics of sensemaking and tensions management at the individual level and hence to answer the research question: How are coopetition tensions experienced and coped with through cognitively addressing the past and future?

A case-based approach is adopted in the empirical part of the study, including two cases involving inter-firm coopetition and we applied a qualitative inquiry for gathering empirical data. First, our study extends theoretical insights on how tensions manifest through managerial sensemaking. Second, we contribute to research on individual level coping strategies inherent in the coopetition capability concept by showing that managerial mindsets encompass continuous re-imaginings of cooperative and competitive pasts, presents and futures. Furthermore, third, the findings of our study suggest that managers cope with experienced tensions through their capability to not only re-imagine distant competitive and cooperative pasts and futures, but also through enacting these in the present.

2. Theoretical background

In this section, the theoretical reference frame is presented. First, coopetition is elaborated on from the perspective of tension and the management of tension. We introduce different levels of coopetition and present our focus that is on the individual level. Second, coopetition related to individual sensemaking is described.

2.1. Understanding coopetition tensions and management

2.1.1. Coopetition tensions

When it comes to levels of analysis, competitive tensions are multifaceted and can arise on different levels: organizational- and individual levels (e.g. Tidström, 2014). Individuals involved in inter-firm interactions are assumed to experience tensions, since they become engaged in both cooperative and competitive behavior in practice (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Fernandez et al., 2014; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014). On an individual level, tensions concern cognitive issues such as emotional and behavioral ambivalence (Raza-Ullah, 2020; Tidström, 2014).

Tensions inherent in simultaneous cooperation and competition, can be related to paradox. Smith and Lewis (2011: 382) define “paradox” as contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time. By nature, coopetition is paradoxical as it embeds the tension between the contradictory, but interrelated elements of cooperation and competition (Raza-Ullah, 2020). In coopetition research, three different perspectives on tensions can be discerned. Grounded in the assumption that coopetition is a *type* of paradoxical tension, one

view argues that coopetition represents a tension as it involves the simultaneous existence of the opposing activities of cooperation and competition (see e.g. Wilhelm, 2011). Another perspective treats tensions as *situations* of conflict in coopetition (e.g. Tidström, 2014), which means that tensions represent situations of perceived incompatibility. Within this perspective focus is on cause and type of tension as well as the management and outcome of tension. The third view approaches tensions as a result/outcome of coopetition, meaning that coopetition is a *source* of tension (e.g. Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016; Fernandez et al., 2014). This view considers coopetition as paradox, which gives rise to perceived tension.

Here, coopetition is viewed as a source of tension, which relates to a cognitive perspective on coopetition tensions (e.g. Fernandez et al., 2014; Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015; Park, Srivastava, & Gnyawali, 2014; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014). This implies that individuals exposed to the paradox of coopetition, feel and experience tension. According to Raza-Ullah (2020) it is important to study *experienced tension*, as managerial actions and responses are more coupled with what they perceive and experience rather than what the actual tension is about. From this perspective, the coopetition paradox exists due to simultaneous cooperation and competition between firms (Bengtsson et al., 2016) and manifests in tensions when individuals perceive (Czakoń, Fernandez, & Miná, 2014) and experience (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah, 2020; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014) conflicting emotions.

For example, Raza-Ullah et al. (2014) argue that coopetition tensions are brought to the fore as individuals evaluate benefits and drawbacks from coopeting, and subsequently holding both positive and negative emotions. Likewise, Gaim and Wåhlin (2016: 35) argue that “the paradoxical tensions result from the perception of opposing, conflicting, and interrelated characteristics of para-doxes and are reflected, cognitively and emotionally when one attends to both demands simultaneously”. According to Bednarek, Paroutis, and Sillince (2017) there is a lack of research focusing on how the transcendence of paradoxes unfolds through the practices of actors in organizations. The findings of their study indicate that in practice, by individuals, a paradox is multifaceted and relates to the paradoxical content and context, time (stability and change) as well as to distance (maintaining and reducing). This implies that when aiming to understand the coopetition paradox from an individual perspective, it is important to consider its multifaceted nature.

It should be noted that the ability to think paradoxically is exogenous to interaction (Hernes & Weik, 2007), and a cognitive approach to paradox has consequently been criticized for overlooking paradox from the perspective of interaction (Tuckermann, 2019). An endogenous approach to paradox assumes that paradoxes become salient or latent through social interactions (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016), like talk related to paradox (Abdallah, Denis, & Langley, 2011). Likewise, we treat paradoxes as constructed in the minds of managers through their perceptions of the present and the future while also translating these perceptions of paradoxes into social interaction (e.g. Abdallah et al., 2011). In competitive business relationships, this implies that cognitively perceived tensions influence social interaction, which in turn influence the development of the relationship.

Tensions constitute a source of stimulation and continuous improvement for the organizations coopeting, as the simultaneity of cooperation and competition produce the actual leveraging of benefits (Gnyawali et al., 2016). However, coopetition tensions may also have negative implications (Gnyawali et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014), coupled with undesired knowledge transfer and asymmetrical learning (Le Roy & Czakoń, 2016). Moreover, coopetition may result in stress for individuals (Gnyawali et al., 2016). In order to be beneficial, coopetition requires organizational and individual coping strategies (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2014; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Tidström, 2014).

An overview including examples of coopetition research on tensions is illustrated in Table 1.

It is apparent from the table that research on coopetition tensions is

Table 1
Examples of research on coopetition tensions.

Authors	Year	Tensions	Management strategies	Level of analysis	Empirical study	Key findings
Morris, Kocak & Özer	2007	cooperation and competition	mutual benefit, commitment and trust	inter-firm	Quantitative study of 647 firms	mutual benefit and commitment drives performance, while trust do not
Chin, Chan & Lam	2008	cooperation and competition	commitment and trust	inter-firm	Quantitative study of 149 firms	commitment and trust are critical for successful coopetition
Yami & Nemeh	2014	value creation and value appropriation	trust	inter-firm	Qualitative case study research	trust is needed in order to complement the contractual framework for managing coopetition
Tidström	2014	various kinds of tensions	underlying issues and conflict management styles	inter-firm	Qualitative case study research	the styles of competition and avoidance are common in coopetition
Estrada et al.	2016	knowledge: sharing and protecting	a contingency perspective	intra-firm	Quantitative study of 768 firms	coopetition has a positive effect on performance when there are internal knowledge sharing and formal knowledge protection
Fernandez & Chiambaretto	2016	information: sharing and protecting	formal and informal control mechanisms	inter-firm, intraindividual	Qualitative case study research	a combination of separation and integration is needed, the project manager's integration of the paradox is important
Rouyre & Fernandez	2019	information: sharing and protecting	formal and informal control mechanisms	open innovation projects	Qualitative case study research	a centralized project team is important for tensions management
Seran, PellegrinBoucher & Gurau	2016	cooperation and competition	formal and informal coordination	intra-firm, interindividual	Qualitative case study research	integration is a fruitful management strategy that is facilitated by social interaction and trust
Wilhelm & Sydow	2018	the coopetition paradox of cooperation and competition, coopetition capabilities	separation and acceptance	inter-firm	Qualitative case study research	splitting seems to be the most prominent way to handle the coopetition paradox, coopetition capabilities as organizational capabilities
Bengtsson & Kock	2000	cooperation and competition	separation & integration	inter-firm, intra-firm, intraindividual	Qualitative case study research	cooperation and competition can be separated on firm-level, on individual-level focus can be only on one
Fernandez, Le Roy & Gnyawali	2014	various kinds of tensions on different levels	separation & integration	inter-firm, intra-firm, inter-individual	Qualitative case study research	a combination of separation and integration is needed
Le Roy, Fernandez & Chiambaretto	2017	knowledge: sharing and protecting	separation, integration, co-management	inter-firm, intra-firm, inter-individual	Conceptual study	different management techniques should be used on different levels
Gnyawali & Park	2011	cooperation and competition, value creation and value appropriation	coopetition capability	inter-firm, intraindividual	Qualitative case study research	coopetition capability influences coopetition in a positive way
Bengtsson, Raza-Ullah & Vanyushyn	2016	coopetition paradox, cooperative tension, coopetition capability	coopetition capability	intra-individual	Quantitative study of 1532 firms	coopetition capability moderates the impact of coopetition paradox on external tension
Raza-Ullah	2020	emotional ambivalence	blending of balancing and emotional capabilities	intra-individual	Quantitative study of 404 firms	high balancing capability and low emotional capability changes the indirect effect of paradoxical tension on performance from negative to positive
Gnyawali & Park	2009	cooperation and competition	coopetition mindset	industry-level, inter-firm, intra-firm, intra-individual	Conceptual study	a coopetition mindset positively effects the management of coopetition

multidimensional and scattered. Our research is positioned at the individual level and we draw on a cognitive perspective on coopetition tensions, in line with current coopetition research streams (e.g. Raza-Ullah, 2020). The cognitive perspective relates both to perceptions and experience of coopetition tensions, as well as to coping with these.

2.1.2. Coping with coopetition tensions

The most common techniques for coping with coopetition tensions are separation and integration. The separation principle relates to the organizational level and it rests on the assumption that cooperation and competition need to be separated between different activities in order to avoid tensions (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000). Separation advocates a functional, temporal or spatial separation of the management of cooperation on one hand and competition on the other (Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). The integration principle again, refers to individuals' capacity to integrate cooperation and competition (e.g. Chen, 2008). The combination of separating – 'separating elements and honouring unique aspects of each' – and integrating principles – 'stressing synergies and linkages' (Smith & Tushman, 2005) has informed research

on coopetition management techniques, and this has also been the dominating view in coopetition research regarding management of cooperative tensions (Fernandez et al., 2014; Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015).

On an inter-firm level, informal mechanisms for relational governance such as trust (e.g. Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Muthusamy & Dass, 2021; Yami & Nemeh, 2014) and commitment (e.g. Morris, Kocak, & Özer, 2007) are also important for conflict management in cooperative business relationships. Trust becomes relevant in terms of a firm's convictions of how a partner firm will balance self-interest and mutual interest. Commitment relates to coping as it may be low or high, depending on if the partners have mixed or shared motives within the cooperative relationship (Morris et al., 2007).

Moreover, on the inter-firm level of joint working groups between firms engaged in coopetition, tensions can be managed formally by applying the co-management principle which implies a separation technique of competition between the firms, simultaneously as they cooperate within a project team, within which project managers are exposed to integration, as they have to internalize and behave through the duality of cooperation and competition (Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015;

Le Roy, Fernandez, & Chiambaretto, 2018).

Thus, the integration principle pertains to the individual level and includes the development of individuals' capacity for cognitively internalizing the paradox (Fernandez et al., 2014) – accepting the coexistence of the contradictory elements by searching for synergies between them (Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015; Wilhelm & Sydow, 2018) – and integrating the duality in their daily work (Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015). This perspective relates to a microfoundations approach to coping with cooperative tensions. It has been stated that the positive or negative outcomes of a paradox are dependent on micro-level activities and how individuals cope with paradox (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013). This perspective is emerging within coopetition research, conceptualizing cooperative capabilities as the aggregation of individual cognitive and behavioral coping with paradoxes across multiple actor levels (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Gnyawali et al., 2016; Le Roy & Czakon, 2016; Le Roy & Fernandez, 2015; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016).

In particular, focusing attention on individual coping strategies of managers becomes crucial as top managers are assumed to impose cooperative tensions on lower organizational levels (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014; Tidström, 2014), in this sense spilling over tension from the inter-organizational level to the internal organization, also influencing the degree the tensions are felt by employees (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2014; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014). Top managers have also traditionally been assumed to drive coopetition forward through their previous experiences and personal relationships (Gnyawali & Park, 2011; Lindström & Polsa, 2016).

Managerial perceptions of cooperative tensions can be related to the research streams on cooperative *capability*. A coopetition capability can be identified from the perspectives of three dimensions: analytical, emotional, and executional or balancing (Gnyawali et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah, 2020). A cooperative analytical capability can be defined as “the ability to think paradoxically...” (Bengtsson et al., 2016). This can be related to a cooperative mindset, and it has been argued that successful management of coopetition is possible ‘if and only if individuals can develop a cooperative mindset’ (Le Roy et al., 2018). A mindset can be described as a typical mental outlook that influences how one interprets and responds to situations (Gaim & Wählin, 2016). Differences in individual cognition with regards to coopetition can be related to different individual mindsets (Czakon & Czernek-Marszałek, 2020).

A cooperative mindset encompasses accepting cooperative tensions, embracing conflict, diversity and variety (Luo, 2007). Moreover, a cooperative mindset facilitates knowledge filtering and directs action, which becomes crucial for practicing coopetition effectively (Luo, 2007). Successful engagement in coopetition requires managers to develop this specific cognitive capacity, which entails: (a) recognizing the importance of coopetition; (b) identifying opportunities of value creation with competitors based on past experience; (c) helping other managers to develop a cooperative mindset (Gnyawali & Park, 2009). A cooperative mindset consequently comprises cognitive requirements (Wang & Krakover, 2007). On an emotional level, again, a coopetition capability increases managers' willingness to be more receptive to both positive and negative stimuli, and it facilitates an understanding of how to efficiently cope with mixed emotions for example related to cooperative tensions (Raza-Ullah, 2020).

Executional capabilities, again, are needed in order to develop and utilize coopetition routines (Gnyawali et al., 2016), to secure benefits from the synergy of simultaneous cooperation and competition, and to facilitate decision-making (Seran, Pellegrin-Boucher, & Gurau, 2016). This also includes changing scope and direction of coopetition and to develop alternative strategies. To sum up, a cooperative capability incorporates the individual ability to think paradoxically - i.e. internalize the paradoxical nature of coopetition (Fernandez et al., 2014) - and to translate this into practice (Bengtsson et al., 2016; Gnyawali et al., 2016).

While the coopetition capability concept has recently been

developed, individual-level cognitive underpinnings have been left unattended both conceptually and empirically (Czakon & Czernek-Marszałek, 2020). As our review shows, although several studies stress the importance of managers developing capabilities for coping with coopetition tensions, to our knowledge there are few studies exploring managerial cognition in depth, such as the temporal dynamics of mindsets. We argue that the sensemaking approach holds potential to unravel additional features of a coopetition mindset and capability at the individual level and to extend knowledge on how tensions are coped with in practice (Gnyawali et al., 2016). In combining focus on cognition and action (Weick, 1995), the sensemaking perspective offers potential for scrutiny of cognition as well as of cooperative development, for example by scrutinizing managers' creation and re-creation of interaction logics related to simultaneous and interrelated cooperation and competition (e.g. Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016b; Stadler & Van Wassenhove, 2016).

2.2. Sensemaking and coopetition

Uncertainty and ambiguity (Weick, 1995) stemming from changing market conditions have been argued to trigger managerial sensemaking of coopetition (Baldwin & Bengtsson, 2004). As cooperation in the present becomes introduced into past enacted competition and cognitive models, it triggers dissatisfaction (e.g. Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016a). Studies have further argued that through sensemaking over time, a managerial mindset, and consequently coopetition, develop (Pattinson et al., 2018). Stadler and Van Wassenhove (2016) demonstrate how employees develop the ability to accept both cooperation and competition, and when to apply a cooperative and competitive frame in order to realize coopetition. Sensemaking and coopetition thus incorporates the creation of new cooperative cognitive mindsets that individuals draw on in order to participate in, and move forward with, coopetition (Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016a, 2016b).

Sensemaking has traditionally been approached in terms of retrospection in order to establish what has been in order to move on when faced with novelty or ambiguity (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), whereas prospective sensemaking is defined as ‘sensemaking processes where the attention and concern of people is primarily directed at events that may occur in the future’ (Rosness, Evjmo, Haavik, & Wærø, 2016: 55) and where past events are inserted into the present and reinterpreted in order to provide a coherent, as well as optimistic, future vision (Gephart, Topal, & Zhang, 2010).

Explicitly drawing on the sensemaking perspective, Lundgren-Henriksson and Kock (2016a, 2016b) address the link between experienced and expressed emotions and sensemaking. Although conceptualizing both the retrospective and prospective dimensions of sensemaking, connecting past competition with skepticism and future cooperation with optimism, these studies still treat the past, present, and future as rather distinct, as well as do not take perceptions and experiences of tensions into account. As such, the theoretical understanding of time related to managerial sensemaking is incomplete and requires further development.

The importance of anticipation and of all temporal dimensions in the sensemaking process has been raised (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). A process view of reality (e.g. Langley & Tsoukas, 2010) moves away from temporal linearity and conceptualizes the temporal states as non-linear, intertwined and co-existing in a constantly moving flow of experience (Introna, 2019). Such a view accordingly assumes an ongoing present where the past and future are continuously present through memory and anticipation – a stream of ongoing experiences and imagination between ‘the present of the past and the present of the future’ (Carlsen, 2006). When making sense of events occurring in the present, both the past and future are drawn on as we strive to create plausible connections. From this perspective, managerial reflections on what has been, the present state, and what is coming in the future with regards to coopetition, are thus assumed as constantly co-existing. We therefore argue that how

referencing and connecting between temporal states takes place in managerial sensemaking brings a more nuanced approach to present understandings of the coopetition paradox and coping.

In order to extend understanding of the temporal dynamics of managerial sensemaking, we draw inspiration from [Hernes and Schultz's \(2020\)](#) recent conceptualization of temporal distancing and translation which explores how past and future distant events are recalled and imagined, and translated into the present through individuals' situated activity, possibly transforming the present. We draw on [Hernes and Schultz's \(2020\)](#) conceptualization of distant events as 'particular experiences, occasions, and periods available to be recalled' and 'hypothesized happenings', which are of particular significance to actors and consequently for their sensemaking and moving forward. In a similar vein, sensemaking research on strategy-making embracing time dynamics posits that shared views around strategies develop through ongoing (re-) interpretations of the past, present, and future ([Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013](#)).

We adopt the definition of sensemaking as "a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn" ([Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 67](#)). We posit that when managers are faced with violated experiences related to coopetition, and when trying to create a plausible reality (i.e. interpretation) and to move forward (i.e. acting), in the present, recalled and (re-) imagined distant past and future cooperative and competitive series of relational events would become important.

In the ongoing flow of overlapping pasts, presents, and futures (solid lines in [Fig. 1](#)), we conceptualize temporal distancing and translating as cognitive activities, through which referencing the (competitive and cooperative) past and future takes place (dotted lines in [Fig. 1](#)) and connections are possibly made

We now turn to demonstrating these temporal dynamics of managerial sensemaking through two empirical cases.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and setting

Our qualitative data comes from two separate case studies on coopetition in different industries conducted separately. This approach has been used in studying organizational change ([Staudenmayer, Tyre, & Perlow, 2002](#)) and also in paradox research, which even studied different industries ([Abdallah et al., 2011](#)). Similar to these studies, in retrospect we realized through discussion that both cases on coopetition demonstrated interesting aspects of managerial sensemaking dynamics. Similar to [Abdallah et al. \(2011\)](#) the study is argued to adopt characteristics of a replicated multiple case study ([Yin, 2008](#)).

The empirical study includes two cases from different Finnish industries: the media industry (Case A) and the vehicle manufacturing industry (Case B). At the time of the studies, the context within which the case companies operated was very similar. Both cases involve Finnish companies that are operating within industries facing tough competition and an increasing need for cooperation between firms.

The two cases are promising settings because:

- All companies are small- or middle-sized companies in industries in a need of radical change, and who consequently benefit from, and are inclined to engage in, coopetition (e.g. [Gnyawali & Park, 2009](#)).
- The companies in the cases have a long history of competition and were moving towards increased cooperation at the time of the study. Both cases exist within industries facing a change of the competitive landscape through the specialization of product concepts.
- Initiating managers in both cases (Top managers in Alfa Case A, and CEO D in Case B) organized and led the cooperation, while deciding on and developing the respective companies' individual present and future offerings.
- The initiating managers experienced widespread uncertainty (e.g. [Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995](#)) related to the future industry position and cooperative development.
- The initiating managers frequently experienced inequality in terms of sharing and receiving resources between the firms, i.e. perceived breaches of trust and commitment ([Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Morris et al., 2007](#)).
- Particularly perceptions of the future appeared to guide managers' decision-making and to play a part in the cooperative projects between the competing firms moving forward.

In line with [Czakon and Czernek-Marszalek \(2020\)](#), our qualitative inquiry was guided by the aim of understanding a phenomenon by finding answers to the question "How?". We captured the prevalence of perceived coopetition, as well as tensions, in both cases through the identified simultaneity of cooperation (mutuality and resource commitment) – and competition (rivalrous spirit and resource relevance) – ([Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018](#)).

Case A involves three companies and Case B two companies. Case A encompasses cooperation between three companies (here named Alpha, Beta and Ceta) operating in the Finnish minority media industry. Alpha founded in late 1990s publishes three newspaper brands and Beta, founded in late 2000's, publishes five brands. Alpha has around 100 employees whereas Beta's employees surmount to around 200. Ceta with less than 50 employees publishes two newspaper brands, one that dates back to early 1800s. The companies publish digital and printed newspapers, the latter partly in overlapping regions and are thus competing in terms of local news. Due to a combination of increasing production and distribution costs of printed newspapers, as well as entrance of new digital media actors, the companies initiated inter-organizational cooperation.

The stated aim of cooperation and exchange of resources was to allow the companies to save resources that could then be directly allocated to their core areas of expertise, ultimately increasing each's chances of survival in the changing industry and in digital competition. Since all companies operate in minority media, the journalistic content of the respective newspaper brands holds value for all companies involved. The cooperation is active and based on voluntary agreement ([Czakon & Rogalski, 2014](#)), grounded in a shared view that the overall industry and all companies will benefit ([Wang & Krakower, 2007](#)). In practice, the cooperation, initiated in 2013, encompasses an ongoing exchange of journalistic material between the companies, joint production of television and radio pages across the newspapers (from 2014), and the joint distribution of newspapers between two of the

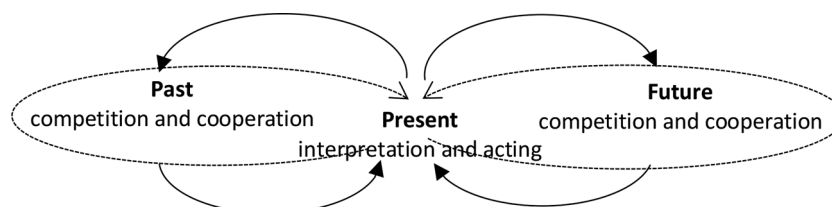


Fig. 1. Temporal dynamics of managerial sensemaking.

companies (from 2014).

Case B concerns cooperation between two Finnish companies (here named Delta and Gamma) manufacturing chassis for lorries and trailers. Delta is a family-owned firm that was founded in 1945. At the time of the study, the amount of employees at Delta has been between 130 and 180. Gamma was established in 1986 and at the time of our study the amount of employees was about 47. The cooperation between the companies started early in 2000 when the competitive atmosphere can be described as rivalrous. At that time the companies were competing on the Finnish market by selling similar products to the same customers. The managing director (CEO) of Delta drove the initiative for cooperation, who wanted to restructure the industry from being competitive to become one where cooperating companies with focused product portfolios could offer customer-specific trailers. However, Gamma continued selling competing products on the Finnish market, although the idea with the cooperation was that the companies should share resources, specialize and concentrate on joint value creation (Wang & Krakower, 2007).

In practice, the cooperation between the companies is related to acting as buyers and sellers in relation to one another's main offerings. Moreover, Gamma uses Delta's sales network in the Norwegian market. From the perspective of competition, the resource commitment between the firms was unequal, as Delta shared more resources than Gamma did. However, throughout the relationship between the firms, they have been competitors on the Finnish market where they manufacture, market and sell similar products to the same customers. Based on Czakon and Rogalski (2014) it is thus possible to identify both passive and active competitive activities by Gamma throughout the coopetition between the firms.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In Case A, interviews (15 in total) with managing directors and head operational managers of the three companies that were all part of the cooperation were conducted in 2013–2014 (see Table 2). In total nine informants were interviewed: four from Alpha and Beta and two from Ceta. In Alpha, the CEO and operational manager were each interviewed once, whereas the top managers were interviewed twice. In Beta, each informant was interviewed one time, whereas in Ceta, two interviews were carried out with each informant. The interviews generally lasted

between 45 and 90 min. Although changes in management occurred, it did not have an impact on the data collection's focus on the material exchange since the initiating managers of the cooperation stayed the same.

In Case B (10 in total), two informants were interviewed and both were the managing directors of the firms (see Table 2). In 2003 both informants were interviewed twice and each of them was interviewed once in 2004, 2005 or 2006, and both in 2011. The interviews lasted between 20 and 90 min, with an average of 45 min.

In both cases, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in detail directly after the interview. Hence, the data set comprises 25 in-depth interviews in total. Table 2 provides details on the data material.

The data sets and data collection of the two cases were highly similar. Our sampling strategy was to purposefully, from each firm, select those individuals with as much as possible, knowledge of, and involvement in, the coopetitive business relationship. Higher-level managers were chosen as informants for exploring experience of tensions and coping at the individual level (e.g. Bednarek et al., 2017), for two reasons. First, they were directly involved in formulating, implementing and re-formulating the cooperation while still competing, both on a strategic and practical level. Second, choosing these managers as our main analytical focus allowed us to delve deeper into the experience acquired as a result of coopetition over time from the perspective of the initiating actors. In both cases, each informant was as far as possible interviewed several times, in a systematic manner, in order to increase the trustworthiness of the emerging findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, being able to interview both 'sides' of the coopetition relationship also allowed us to compare and verify statements regarding social interactions.

The repeated interviews over time primarily offered a way for us to capture the nature and development of coopetition. In the interviews, we traced events and experiences in retrospect while simultaneously following the development into the future (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). In this manner, we discerned organizational and relational outcomes along the way and were able to focus our data collection on the development of particular series of events, the material exchange in Case A, and product offerings and sales cooperation on the Nordic market in Case B.

The interviews included open questions through which the informants were free to reflect upon the past, present, as well as future. The informants were for example asked to describe situations when they had perceived difficulties in cooperation between the firms. We asked for detailed information about the nature of events, how it was perceived, felt and how the managers moved on with the cooperation. Interviewing informants in real time and 'recording' perceptions of present events at different stages (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010) aided our understanding of how the informants experienced and coped with tensions in the present. The retrospective data provided a context for the interview data on these events.

The analysis began with forming case stories where we sketched the unfolding coopetition and noted managerial perceptions. When going through the material we detected that almost in each interview, managers were continuously addressing both the past and the future when describing particular events and subsequent tensions in the present. Hence, after forming our initial understandings of how cooperation and competition manifested in the respective cases, in the first stage we searched each case's interview transcripts for indications of perceptions of tensions between cooperation and competition, through descriptions such as 'on the one hand/ on the other hand', 'but', 'yet'.

We then moved on to search the transcripts for coping patterns, searching for informants indicating efforts of solving tensions cognitively and individually, i.e. making sense on how to proceed, as well as the actual decisions and actions taken by managers. The decision-making context with regards to coopetition development over time was hence taken into account (Smith, 2014).

In line with other empirical studies on paradox (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014; Smith & Tushman, 2005), our analysis and coding became highly abductive as it encompassed constantly moving

Table 2
Interviews and informants.

Case	Company	Year	Informant	Informant's industry experience
A	Alpha	2013	CEO A	moderate experience
A	Alpha	2013	TM A1	extensive experience
A	Alpha	2013	TM A2	extensive experience
A	Alpha	2014	TM A1	extensive experience
A	Alpha	2014	TM A2	extensive experience
A	Alpha	2013	OM A	extensive experience
A	Alpha	2014	OM A	extensive experience
A	Beta	2013	CEO B1	extensive experience
A	Beta	2014	CEO B2	newly recruited, extensive experience
A	Beta	2013	TM B1	moderate experience
A	Beta	2014	TM B2	newly recruited, extensive experience
A	Ceta	2013	CEO C	extensive experience
A	Ceta	2014	CEO C	extensive experience
A	Ceta	2013	TM C	extensive experience
A	Ceta	2014	TM C	extensive experience
B	Delta	2003	CEO D	extensive experience
B	Gamma	2003	CEO G	extensive experience
B	Delta	2003	CEO D	extensive experience
B	Gamma	2003	CEO G	extensive experience
B	Delta	2004	CEO D	extensive experience
B	Gamma	2004	CEO G	extensive experience
B	Delta	2005	CEO D	extensive experience
B	Gamma	2006	CEOG	extensive experience
B	Delta	2011	CEO D	extensive experience
B	Gamma	2011	CEO G	extensive experience

* CEO = Managing Director, TO = Top Manager, OM = Operational Manager.

between comparing raw data, emerging themes, and the literature streams (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in identifying tensions and coping strategies.

The material was coded in different stages (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) similar to other coopetition studies on tensions (e.g. Chiambaretto, Massé, & Mirc, 2019; Fernandez, Le Roy, & Chiambaretto, 2018). The first stage of the analysis was largely driven by coopetition literature in identifying tensions and individual coping. In a second analysis stage, we took on a more inductive orientation and returned to the material. We noticed that within many of the interview accounts, informants described the cooperative activities and the associated tensions by comparing the past/present and present/future, and, in terms of a longer time span connecting past, present and future.

After this, we were convinced that temporal dynamics figured predominantly in both cases. In order to assess managerial sensemaking, we focused on spotting cognitive constructions of events and scenarios (Staudenmayer et al., 2002) that had either happened or were imagined, and that were related to cooperation and competition. We first assessed these constructions within each case. We then moved to comparing the coding from each case (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For example, we arranged statements such as “There has been actors who have had the attitude that ‘I’ll be part of cooperating, but I’ll pick the best parts without contributing’ “under the first order theme ‘Events relating to receiving non-equal return/value when sharing resources’. Similarly, accounts such as “my way of solving conflicts has been to look

at it in such a manner that the process is not mature yet” were assigned to the theme ‘Setbacks natural steps in relational development’.

When we arrived at a tentative first order framework of themes prevalent in both cases, we arranged the first order categories into second-order themes in order to arrive at a higher abstraction level in the coding process, and to link to the literatures on paradox, coopetition, and sensemaking. Our conceptualization of sensemaking as a process in which the past, present and future are co-existing aided our organization of the first order themes into second-order themes. For example, first-order themes and subsequent statements (e.g. ‘...plans of joint projects that will not be realized, as it was before’) that clearly referred to the respondents cognitively accessing events or time periods when ‘old’ competition prevailed were assigned under ‘Recalling past competition’. The same organizing principle was executed for ‘Imagining future cooperation’. We considered the occurrence of these themes in relation to the respondents’ assessment of the present. The combination of second order-themes into aggregate dimensions ultimately enabled us to study the relationships between second order themes; how the perceived difficulties to connect recalled past competition and imagined future cooperation gave rise to questioning in the present (i.e. experienced tensions) (temporal distancing), and how coping with tensions was enabled by cognitively referencing and connecting revised pasts and reimagined futures, informing adjustments in present cooperation and competition (temporal integrating). Fig. 2 illustrates the coding scheme.

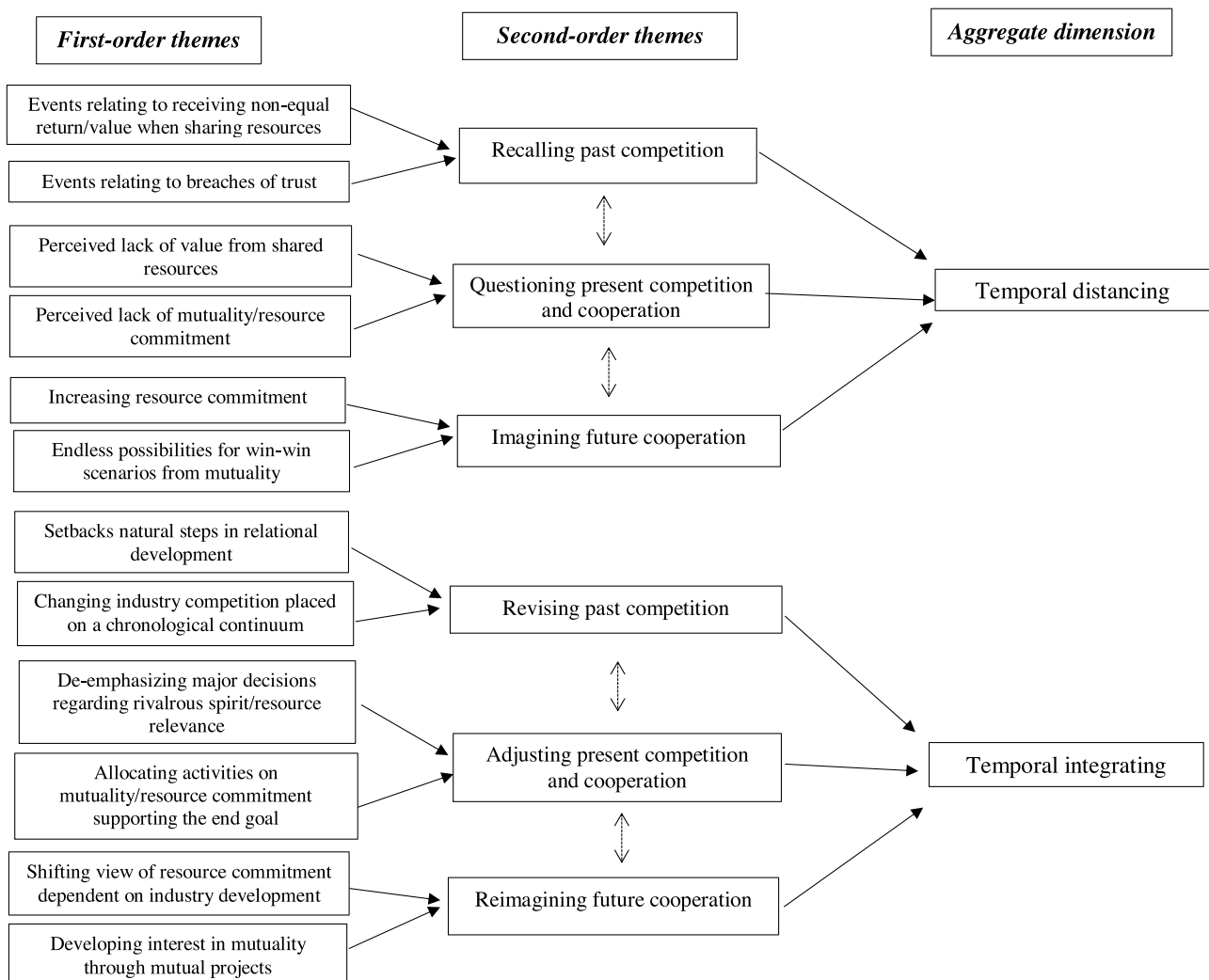


Fig. 2. Coding scheme.

4. Findings: temporal distancing and integrating

4.1. Sensemaking dynamics

We argue that temporal distancing and integrating are cognitive activities through which referencing of the past (events and time periods of competition between the firms) and the future (potential events, time periods and visions of cooperation between the firms) takes place and plausible connections are possibly made. Whereas temporal distancing illustrates how managers perceive difficulties to connect the past and future and to create a plausible interpretation of present competition (i.e. tensions), temporal integrating shows how a plausible interpretation of the present is established informing managerial actions and decision-making on cooperation and/or competition (i.e. coping) (see Fig. 3). We now turn to the cases.

4.1.1. Case A

Cooperation within the minority press had been discussed for decades but never crystallized into concrete actions. When the industry situation aggravated, managers in Alpha initiated discussions with managers in the other firms, resulting in a collective decision to start cooperation in the form of a material exchange that encompassed sharing journalistic material.

Sharing journalistic material with other newspaper, particularly local content, had never been done before as it constitutes a competitive advantage and the core of newspaper brands. It also goes against the core of journalistic thinking – being unique. On a general level, the persistence of divergence between joint value creation and firm value creation was related to an impending risk of potential breaches in trust between the firms as newspapers might decide to not share their content, and thus contribute unequally to the exchange.

Temporal distancing. The initiating managers in Alpha were particularly optimistic when the exchange concretized in 2013, given experiences from the long history of competition between the firms. The managers did not only imagine the benefits from continuous cooperation within the scopes of the present exchange but were also forecasting what mutual opportunities could be realized after this ‘milestone’ in their relational development. The perceived limitless opportunities created future references for moving forward and investing in relational development. Optimism became evident as managers imagined future events:

There is distrust all the time, that the other is trying to benefit at the expense of the other one. I remember when we talked about sharing material twenty years ago, for me it was the worst thing one could ever imagine. So, it is absolutely amazing now, we can continue and extend this cooperation as far as we want, joint TV pages, series, which does not have a negative impact on the local material [...]. (TM A1, 1st interview)

Yet, despite the widespread optimism, the material exchange was not utilized to such an extent at operational levels across the firms as hoped for by the managers. Managers of Alpha became convinced that if their firm, as well as the industry as a whole, was to survive, action would have to be taken immediately, but that the development of the present cooperation, including the other firms’ realization of the agreed upon resource commitment in terms of sharing material, was not matching the pace of the industry changes.

Managers experienced a present reality where rivalrous thinking from the past still became present. Scepticism and frustration about investing further resources into the present form of cooperation, and eventually not receiving the expected future resource relevance and accordingly the need for expected firm value creation, were experienced. Distant past time periods were recalled, and a sense of continuation of strong competition between the parties became explicit:

This has opened a door for bigger stuff where we are discussing big cooperation projects [...] As a journalist you have an attitude that when something has been published elsewhere it is not valuable. We are stuck in old ways of doing things [...] But competition is made up in our brains, we need to forget about it. I want to see institutionalized cooperation that is necessary for us in order to stay competitive in the future [...] I am stressed that it goes so slowly. Is it at all possible to cooperate? Is there an interest or not? And that makes one a bit depressed. (TM A1, 2nd interview)

I can tell you why it [cooperation] goes so slowly. In the past, we have had individuals that have dictated the terms for us others saying ‘I will take the best bits from the candy bowl, but I will not contribute. There has been free-riding. (CEO C, 2nd interview)

Temporal integrating. It became evident in the accounts that in particular the managers initiating the material exchange in Alpha also adjusted the pasts and futures that were recalled or imagined. Whereas future optimism was mitigated following from re-assessing both relational and industry developments, disappointments stemming from recalling the past were also lessened by placing the development of the material exchange, and cooperation in general, in a historical context. The perceived existence of old rivalrous spirit became embedded in a bigger whole, a starting point towards a common future:

You have to build on cooperation through some kind of optimism and we are doing that, this is the first step. Through cooperation we will survive and develop the future industry. The material bank in the present is about the general idea of sharing. Like always in the minority community, cooperation starts with suspicion, ‘I can do it myself’. But then you realize that the shared material also brings something else, an increased knowledge in the minority, and that common interest in each other’s regions matters. (OM A, 2nd interview)

The sense of being part of a common future and on a projected line of happenings, i.e. saving the minority media, convinced managers that

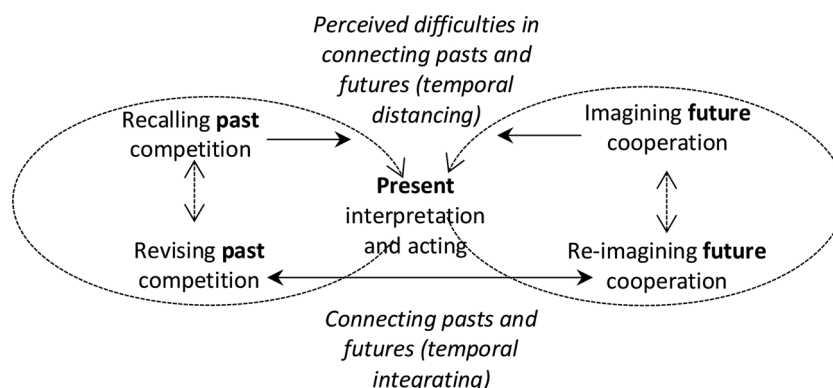


Fig. 3. Findings – temporal distancing and integrating.

investing efforts into cooperation was the right choice in the present and to keep on moving towards the goal through staying committed to the resource exchanges. The re-imagined pasts and futures served to convince the managers that present setbacks related to mutual value creation were natural and part of a step-by-step relational becoming towards future win-win possibilities.

There have been fights in the minority community throughout the past. In a historical perspective this cooperation is huge. There is a willingness and an insight now that something has to be done. Competition is an overrated concept, it does not exist, we should not think about that now rather that we have a sustainable transition to the digital. Cooperation is now about sharing and thinking about the bigger whole so that newspapers and the minority language do not perish. There are endless opportunities and we have taken the first steps. (TM A1, 2nd interview)

To foster the perceived positive momentum regarding relational development, the material exchange in its original form was abandoned and managers strived for creating a sense of joint activities continuously emerging. The initiating managers in Alpha focused on continuously enacting the perceived optimistic future through realizing smaller cooperative projects in the present, in this way demonstrating success and securing 'proof' of firm value creation transmitting into the future. For example, a planned material exchange around a common theme in the form of article series was implemented, a form of exchange that secured a continuous flow of articles between the firms:

People have now seen the fruits of good cooperation, and that no one loses anything. One can still compete, but one can also share what one has created. (OM A, 2nd interview)

If we can run cooperative projects where we show that the outcome of alone is one and the outcome of together is two, then I believe that all sceptics will sooner or later be in. (CEO B2, 2nd interview)

This modification in the material exchange was initiated to develop the cooperation overall, and to demonstrate that successful cooperation was possible, rather than creating benefits in the present. Ultimately, this modification proved beneficial not only for cooperation moving forward, but also for sustaining manager's future optimism across the firms.

4.1.2. Case B

The industry was characterized by fierce competition and cooperation between firms was rare. On a general level, the persistence of divergence between joint value creation and firm value creation was in Case B related to win-lose dilemmas. In particular, there was a continuous uncertainty for the firms if the cooperation would benefit their present and future market positions. Manager Delta had a profound wish to re-structure the market by getting firms to realize the value of internal specialization and inter-firm cooperation. In this way, the networks of cooperating firms would increase value for customers and provide greater competitive advantage for the involved firms. The cooperation between Delta and Gamma was initially based on an informal agreement according to which each firm should specialize in manufacturing certain products. Moreover, Gamma got access to the sales organizations of Delta in Sweden and Norway.

Temporal distancing. On a general level, the managerial aim was to create a future industry structure distinct from the past, where the firms cooperating would signal to the industry that the attitude had shifted and that a united front was in place. The manager imagined future win-win scenarios from the perceived cooperative intent:

In the future, we will focus on different niches. Traditional competitors need not be competitors. Through specialization you can travel beyond the traditional boundaries. Although I do not think this vision is 100 % shared between us. This is my vision with the cooperation and... I am almost sure that Gamma is of another opinion, I believe that I know that, but there are

kind of enough benefits for all in order for the cooperation to be interesting to start with and that is the main idea here. (CEO D, 1st interview)

In practice, the specialization idea of the cooperation between the firms did not work out as desired by CEO D, because Gamma were occasionally selling competing products. However, this was not at first perceived as a loss of value, because of future prospects of mutual benefit, increased cooperation and joint value creation:

Yes, we talk about it like, well, it [cooperation not going as planned] occurred this time, and it is not worse than that because we realize that it is a question of time before we after all actually are not competitors anymore. (CEO D, 1st interview)

Simultaneously, CEO D started to experience disappointment and frustration because Gamma did not focus its product offerings in accordance with the informal agreement as perceived by CEO D. The idea of CEO D was that the firms would specialize in different product segments in all geographical markets. This worked out in Norway and Sweden, but not on the Finnish home market where the firms continued selling similar products to the same customers. Experienced tensions were thus related to sales of competing products by Gamma. These kinds of perceived drawbacks in the present flowed from the past competitive history including not receiving equal value when sharing resources:

We have been thinking in the past that why give benefits to them? What do we get in return? You have been afraid that the other one will use you [...] Then when you have some kind of formal or informal agreement, and you feel that others break it. That they are not selling in accordance with our agreement. (CEO D, 2nd interview)

The other firm not being able to deliver the intended commitment did not match the expected future of CEO D, who experienced hesitance and doubt if one should proceed with the cooperation and who started planning for larger market shares for increased firm value.

Temporal integrating. It also became evident that managers re-imagined the relational pasts and imagined futures. Managers convinced themselves that the 'bad' past, and to a certain extent also present, was necessary for arriving at a better industry future together. Experiences of old competitive mindsets when attempting to implement cooperative agreements, such as through skepticism towards each other regarding opportunistic behavior, and events related to breaches of trust, were assessed as natural. The stage of the industry and of the relationship between Gamma and Delta were perceived as in the beginning of a changing reality. Experienced skepticism was mitigated as the benefits would be secured in the future. As such, managers convinced themselves that continuing cooperation was after all beneficial, offering a sense of certainty for themselves that focusing on joint value creation in the present, would eventually secure future success and firm value:

As you get to know the other company you re-assess cooperation [...] I strongly believe in this cooperation, if we can structure the industry that's enough for me. It will benefit us...but I do not want to include money in it. But I believe that one day you will get something in return. (CEO D, 2nd interview)

Managers re-evaluated the present form of cooperation and what needed to be modified. CEO D (Interview 5) perceived that the level of cooperation that had been promised by Gamma in the beginning, did not realize in practice, and therefore CEO D realized that there were not as many future possibilities for cooperation as had been expected. Focus was directed at the things going right in the present cooperation between the firms, offering a sense of being at the right time and place in the relationship given the retrospective line of events. In the present, managers made an active choice to disregard aspects of the cooperation that had stagnated or were progressing slowly, instead singling out and investing efforts into developing successful parts of the mutual

undertakings:

That's my philosophy, we work with what works and what takes us forward and we ignore what does not work and drives the cooperation down [...] Sometimes you do not do what's agreed...then I have an attitude in principle, that you ignore violations and you move on with what works, if 9 out of 10 things go right. My way of solving conflicts has been to look at it in such a manner that the process is not mature yet. (CEO D, 2nd interview)

The re-assessment of past competition was also related to the changing industry structure, in which cooperation was embedded:

The terms of the cooperation are drafted for potential joint purchasing, but today in practice this kind of cooperation is difficult because of the many differences in the products of the companies, but this is certainly something that will be discussed in the future. The vision for the future is very clear and its fulfilment is of course dependent on the development of the general economic situation, how the customers perceive the cooperation, and the suppliers, how do they react to it? (CEO G, 5th interview)

The cooperation hence became focused on, and adapted to, the present state of both the industry situation and stage of the inter-firm relationship, placed on the range of organizational and relational becoming flowing into the future. Major decisions regarding the scope of cooperation, and the firm's active part in this, were not assessed as the main priority in the present, rather such decisions were assigned to the future. Instead, present focus was directed at activities supporting the creation of a shared view that cooperation was needed in the industry:

We process what we can do now, when we feel that we need to speed up or decrease cooperation we make a new assessment. The cooperation should continuously be adapted, including more areas and what does not fit should be abandoned. CEO D, 2nd interview

CEO G perceived present value creation as beneficial, whereas CEO D, the initiating manager, desired more value from the joint operations between the firms. Despite perceptions related to breaches of trust, there was still a persistent conviction that the cooperation, as imagined by CEO D, would create benefits for all firms involved. Within the present scope of cooperation, CEO D focused on activities in the present that were supporting the imagined future, through realizing small parts of the cooperation, such as joint participation in trade-fairs that created perceived success for everyone involved:

It has a value that you know that okay, we are cooperating and we are working together. You have proof that we will have this cooperation [...] The cooperation will continue, since it does create benefits. We'll continue with smaller concrete projects. I try to keep the projects smaller so that they result in concrete money. (CEO D, 3rd interview)

Based on perceptions of the past related to an unequal division of value of the cooperation and an expectation that this would possibly continue in the future given industry development, CEO D consequently decided to buy more shares in the sales organizations in order to secure value creation for Delta:

I still believe...personally I have decreased the commitment because I realized that we will not proceed without investing money, so instead now I try to receive some monetary benefit from what I have built, and to try to get some payment for the work that I've done and opened up sales channels for the others. (CEO D, 5th interview)

The cooperation between Delta and Gamma continued, however in a modified state than what was imagined in the beginning. There were less interactions between the firms as initially intended, and both started focusing more on firm than on joint value creation.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Temporal sensemaking dynamics: a source of experienced, and coping with, tensions

To capture the continuous emergence and resolution of the cooperation paradox, we argue for a stronger integration of the sensemaking perspective into cooperation studies. In this paper we have done so by illustrating ongoing temporality and managerial cognition in depth. Although we conceptualize both temporal distancing and integrating as cognitively referencing past and futures in the ongoing flow of temporal overlaps (see Fig. 3), we suggest that the possible connections made differ. Whereas temporal distancing becomes associated with questioning cooperation in the present as the individual perceive difficulties to cognitively connect the referenced pasts and futures (i.e. tensions), temporal integrating demonstrates a higher degree of fit, a plausible connection, between the referenced pasts and the future that enables decision-making of immediate and future steps in the relationship (cooperation) and firm related activities (competition) (i.e. coping).

Approaching sensemaking as a highly temporal process – where experienced events and social interaction in the past and present, as well as anticipation of the future, intertwine and becomes of equal value (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Introna, 2019) – assumes a continuous overlap between (multiple) past and future realities of cooperation and competition. We suggest that individuals' continuous referencing and possible connecting (i.e. the cognitive activities) of temporal states, constitutes the source of both experienced tensions and coping with these. We identified experiences of tensions related to both mutuality and rivalrous spirit as well as resource commitment and relevance (Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018).

First, when a connection is not cognitively made, i.e. sensemaking is hampered, and the referenced competitive pasts and cooperative futures are perceived as dissonant, we suggest that the cooperation paradox surface. The findings show recurrent instances of managers perceiving that the mutuality or resource commitment from various stakeholders needed in the present is not delivered. This includes experiences of breaches of present and future trust between the companies (e.g. Czernek & Czakon, 2016; Morris et al., 2007). As both cases indicate, managers experienced frustration and doubt regarding cooperation in the present, including considerations of sticking to the inter-organizational agreements or creating your own future. When faced with such 'violation of expectations' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) in the present, if past relational states – i.e. 'old' mindsets of competition in the industry (how it was before) – are referenced, the past is set out to repeat itself obstructing the connection to the 'new' imagined cooperative future (how it could be). As apparent in both cases, managers assumed rivalrous spirit to still be fairly strong.

The conceptualization of the temporal sensemaking dynamics has implications for understandings of the cooperation tensions concept. Previous research adopting the cognitive view show that the cooperation paradox manifests as managers evaluate and experience positive and negative emotions connected to cooperation and competition (Raza-Ullah et al., 2014). Similarly, our findings demonstrate that tensions do incorporate such a dimension, yet our study extends insights on the perceptions of tensions as we situate these in the continuous flow of the past, present and future. We suggest:

Proposition 1. *In the ongoing flow of temporal overlaps, the cooperation paradox exists due to simultaneous past, present and future cooperative and competitive realities, and cooperation tensions manifest as individuals cognitively perceive difficulties in connecting re-called competitive pasts and imagined cooperative futures (temporal distancing).*

Second, we suggest that making sense of the cooperation situation, i.e. individuals being able to cognitively create a plausible reality from which potential action paths are discerned, is enabled by referencing and connecting re-imagined pasts and futures. Treating temporal states

as overlapping also assumes multiple pasts and futures as co-existing – e.g. ‘pasts’ of competitive events as these happened and were experienced as well as ‘pasts’ of retrospective interpretation of these events (i.e. re-imagined), which gain their meaning from their co-existence. Hence, when faced with ‘violation of expectations’ (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) in the present, if re-imagined pasts and futures are referenced, the establishing of an acceptable connection between the past, present and future is enabled, supporting (1) interpretations of an emerging relationship and implementation of ‘right’ activities given the relational and industry states and (2) managerial focus on cooperation and/or competition in the present, in order to arrive at future returns.

The pasts and futures are translated into the present through manager’s situated activities (Hernes & Schultz, 2020) as we see in both cases when cooperation was continuously modified in accordance with revised future images. Re-imagining past and futures not only served to mitigate negative perceptions and to move forward by trusting in realistic future returns, but also to structure the ‘temporal chaos’ of co-existing past, present, and futures (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) into focused decisions and optimistic action paths (Gephart et al., 2010).

Hence, we suggest that emphasis on cooperation and competition strengths and resulting decisions in the present are framed by continuously re-imagined pasts and futures (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). We believe that this demonstrates a continuous awareness of a possible need to emphasize joint value creation over firm value creation or vice versa, i.e. avoiding an overtake of either depending on changing situations (Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018: 2525). We summarize our findings with regards to individual coping in the following proposition:

Proposition 2. *In the ongoing flow of temporal overlaps, individual interpretations of the present that inform focus on cooperation and/or competition decision-making are enabled by cognitively referencing re-vised competitive pasts and re-imagined cooperative futures that are connected (temporal integrating).*

5.2. Theoretical implications

Our findings confirm a cognitive origin of tensions (Fernandez et al., 2014; Pattinson et al., 2018; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014) in that experiencing and coping with tensions surface through the simultaneous addressing of pasts and futures. Applying a sensemaking approach to coopetition thus shows how experienced tensions and coping cannot be separated.

To the best of our knowledge, previous coopetition research has not delineated cognitive dynamics in terms of managerial coping with coopetition tensions, under the labels of managerial mindsets (e.g. Gnyawali & Park, 2009; Pattinson et al., 2018) and capabilities (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah, 2020). As such, studies adopting an individual level of analysis and a cognitive focus, have not fully captured the interplay of re-imagined cooperative and competitive pasts, presents and futures. Our findings show how managers vacillating between present activities supporting cooperation and competition respectively (Boumgarden, Nickerson, & Zenger, 2012) links with managerial sensemaking of pasts and futures events, which we argue constitutes microfoundations of coopetition capabilities and mindsets.

Furthermore, we advance established conceptualizations of managerial ‘paradoxical thinking’ (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2016) in the coopetition research field by introducing “how connections between the past and future are highlighted, modified, suppressed, or ignored, and other connections are made in their place with a focus on the present” (Hernes, 2007 in Schultz & Hernes, 2013: 17). We bring light to the importance of a retrospective and prospective orientation to sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), where pasts and futures become intertwined in the present, for understanding how managers respond to situations of experienced tensions and manage the contradicting logics of interactions (Bengtsson et al., 2016).

In comparison to past research on individual sensemaking related to

coopetition (Lundgren-Henriksson & Kock, 2016a, 2016b; Pattinson et al., 2018), our findings indicate that managers actually cope with the paradoxical nature of coopetition through their ongoing sensemaking of the past and future. Our findings particularly extend present understandings of managerial approaches to deal with the coopetition paradox cognitively and behaviourally (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2016; Gnyawali et al., 2016), by accentuating the continuous flow of multiple temporal overlaps. This has key implications when it comes to the coopetition capability and the inherent mindset.

Our findings in particular extend knowledge on analytical *capability*, the ability to understand and accept paradox, and on executional capability regarding establishing activities enabling leveraging value from coopetition (Gnyawali et al., 2016). Our findings thus add temporal dynamics to the managerial search for synergies and navigating the simultaneity of joint and firm value creation intent, i.e., “shifting attention and effort as the situation evolves to maximize value creation and limit value destruction” (Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018: 2525).

In line with previous research, we identified how managerial sensemaking supported the emergence of a mindset and accordingly coopetition (Pattinson et al., 2018), yet we advance this insight by arguing that the impact of time on coopetition development should also be considered to include cognitive assessments of ongoing pasts, presents, and futures.

By approaching sensemaking dynamics at the individual and cognitive levels, our findings offer more fine-grained understanding regarding the microfoundations of a coopetition mindset; through temporal distancing and integrating, continuous (re-)imaginings of cooperative and competitive pasts, presents and futures take place. This adds complexity to previous conceptualizations of the perceived importance of, and opportunities for, value creation from coopetition as based on solely past experience (Gnyawali & Park, 2009). In addition, we show how the embracing of experienced tensions between cooperation and competition (Luo, 2007) in the present is related to integration of perceptions related to competitive events in the past with perceptions of future cooperation. Accordingly, by simultaneously addressing distant pasts and futures, managers are able to, in the present, ‘filter perceptions’ (Gaim, 2018) and adjust their cognition, their views and attitudes (Gaim & Wählin, 2016) for example regarding how to respond to intrusions of ‘old’ competitive mindsets in present cooperative activities. In addition, our findings show that intertwined assessments of competitive and cooperative pasts and futures seem to guide managers’ present willingness and efforts to spread the view of the benefits of coopetition (Gnyawali & Park, 2009).

In all, we extend knowledge on the characteristics of a cooperative capability (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2016; Gnyawali et al., 2016; Raza-Ullah, 2020), to include (1) cognitively recalling, (re-)imagining and connecting distant past and future cooperation and competition, mitigating the experienced tensions (Bengtsson et al., 2016), and (2) translating re-imagined pasts and futures into the present by continuously adjusting present focus and decision-making activities (intra- and inter-organizationally), aiding the very transformation of the present scope and direction (Gnyawali et al., 2016) to support coopetition development.

Last, as far as prior research on the management of coopetition tensions is concerned, our findings have implications for the separation approach (e.g. Fernandez & Chiambaretto, 2016). Temporal separation suggests separating cooperation and competition over time, which can be questioned based on our findings since the development of the cooperative business relationship is still determined by individuals’ cognition and their sensemaking that includes present, past and future. Our findings inform coopetition scholars of the importance of the integration technique that includes sensemaking and temporality in relation to coping with coopetition tensions.

5.3. Managerial implications

Our findings indicate that the development of firm level cooperative strategies are influenced by managerial cognition related to imagined past, present and future events. From a managerial perspective, our findings contribute to the current and relevant interest related to emotional and cognitive competences of managers and leaders. Emotional intelligence and self-leadership imply managerial capabilities of analytical self-reflection, encompassing an understanding of how sensemaking is influenced by, as well as influence, various elements on individual- and firm-levels. Our findings provide managers with insights about the importance of reflections and consciousness about how own perceptions, emotions, thinking, and decisions may impact on the development of a cooperative business relationship.

Moreover, for successful implementation of cooperation strategies, intra-firm communication and coordination is crucial, i.e. spreading of a mindset (e.g. Bengtsson et al., 2016; Gnyawali et al., 2016). Consequently, if and how managers' perceptions related to cooperative business relationships enter interaction (Tuckermann, 2019), i.e. are expressed to others, becomes important. For managers, our findings hence offer guidance regarding how cooperation strategies could be framed in communications with other stakeholders; continuous adaptation to fit shifting present and future relational and industry realities are crucial in sustaining momentum.

5.4. Limitations and suggestions for future research

As our qualitative research design did not aim for generalization, we invite future research to empirically test our propositions on distancing and integrating past and future events related to sensemaking, experienced tensions and coping. Future research should explore sensemaking dynamics and cooperation coping strategies further; different types of tension across inter and intra-organizational levels, and if sensemaking, and accordingly coping, differ. A future increased focus on the micro foundations of cooperation tensions holds the potential to unravel a multitude of cognitive dimensions related to perceptions, emotions and coping strategies unfolding over time. Relying solely on interview accounts makes insights of the social construction of paradox of cooperation limited. Future studies could therefore adopt observation as a data collection technique, capturing in situ interaction. For example, a focus on speech in different forms could enable future investigations into how paradoxes are discursively constructed in daily interactions at different firm levels (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) and also how they are coped with by for example employing discourses of transcendence (Abdallah et al., 2011; Bednarek et al., 2017).

Author statement

Eva-Lena Lundgren-Henriksson: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization.

Annika Tidström: Writing – Review and Editing, Investigation, Visualization.

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